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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 NAIROBI 002640

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SUBJECT: SOMALIA: ISLAMIST ADVANCES, PROSPECTS FOR DIALOGUE, BUT STILL NO ADMISSION OF THE AL QAIDA PRESENCE

REF: NAIROBI 2618

Classified By: Deputy PolCouns L. Peterson, Reasons 1.4. (B) and (D).

¶1. (S) SUMMARY: The Somali town of Belet Weyne was taken over by the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), apparently by fiat rather than force, the morning of June 15. This now puts the ICU in control of the entire Shebelle valley and offers enhanced connections to supplies from the Gulf. Leaders in the town of Jowhar met with ICU leaders June 15 reportedly to express appreciation for the departure of the warlords, but also to request that the ICU return to Mogadishu and leave Jowhar to administer itself. Ethiopian forces reportedly remain on alert at Ferfer, but have not yet shown signs of advancing into Somalia. Prime Minister Gedi remains calm about events inside Somalia, assured of the potential for working with moderates within the ICU, including its current public face, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed. We would share Gedi's sense of assurance if we had some indication that the leaders in the Transitional Federal Institutions were seriously considering the difficult deals they may have to strike in order to make allies of the moderates. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) The town of Belet Weyne, near the Ethiopian border, came under Islamic court control the morning of June 15. According to a UN source, this was not a military takeover, but simply an announcement by the court to the community that it was now in control. The court in Belet Weyne was affiliated to some of the Islamic courts in Mogadishu, so there is a direct link with actions of recent days. The end result is that the ICU now influences the whole of the Shebelle valley, including a key road connection to Puntland. This access to Puntland provides enhanced access for the courts to re-supply with goods from the Arabian peninsula.

¶3. (C) In the town of Jowhar, Prime Minister Gedi reports that ICU spokesperson Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed has been in discussions with community leaders to determine what happens next in the town. According to Gedi, the townspeople have expressed their gratitude for the dispatching of the warlords, but have indicated to court leaders that they can now manage affairs on their own and have requested the ICU to leave the town. It is unlikely that the courts will grant this wish, but Sheikh Sharif seems to want to create an appearance of a consultative process. (NOTE: Sheikh Sharif's intentions should be closely scrutinized. After the ICU took control of Mogadishu, Sheikh Sharif said the ICU had not plans to attack Jowhar. Two weeks later, the ICU controls Jowhar. END NOTE.) Gedi noted that, in the takeover of the town, the TFG compound was not touched. A UN source confirmed that the forces taking over Jowhar were highly disciplined, for the most part following strict instructions not to loot in the town. (NOTE: The discipline of the ICU

militias strongly suggests a high level of training, which again points to the training camps we observed in central Somalia starting in 2004 and continuing into 2006. END NOTE.) Those items that were taken have been returned, with apologies, to the UN and an Italian NGO.

¶ 14. (C) Rumors continue to swirl about events in the town of Bur Aqaba, which is on the way to Baidoa (seat of the Transitional Federal Institutions - TFIs). A Somali journalist insisted that instability in Bur Aqaba in recent days portends an imminent attack on Baidoa. (NOTE: This may be true, but the ICU will have to prepare logistically for an attack on Baidoa. END NOTE.) While there have been clashes in Bur Aqaba, these have been disputes between sub-clans in the area, one of which is trying to forge an alliance with the Islamic courts. The UN notes that these conflicts are contained within Bur Aqaba and there are no indications yet that the Islamic courts are planning to push up the road to Baidoa.

¶ 15. (C) According to Somaliland Foreign Minister Edna Adan Ismail, Ethiopian forces remain at Ferfer. They are on alert, but cautious about advancing into central Somalia.

¶ 16. (C) Somali Prime Minister Ali Mohamed Gedi remains calm about events inside Somalia. He has been in contact with Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, whom he characterizes as the representative of the moderates in the ICU. Gedi also noted that Sheikh Sharif was under significant pressure to comply with the wishes of the hardliners in the courts. Gedi advised that he had dispatched some ministers to Mogadishu to engage in informal contacts with members of the ICU. The feedback from these initial contacts indicates that the

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courts are open to dialogue with the TFIs. The TFG governor of Mogadishu, Mohamed Hassan Adde Gabow, will return to Mogadishu on June 17, at which time he will lead further, more formal efforts at dialogue, engaging with both the courts and civil society organizations.

¶ 17. (C) COMMENT: Gedi's calm about current events was striking. We are not confident the TFG will be able to obtain quick results from negotiations, and there does not seem to have been critical thought within the TFIs about what the courts could demand in exchange for working together. Gedi's position, in particular, may be a negotiating chip for Mogadishu's Ayr community. We would be slightly more comfortable if Somalia's political class were to acknowledge that such difficult issues lie ahead of them.

¶ 18. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: All players remain silent on the issue of al Qaida members sheltered in Mogadishu. Leaders of the TFIs, fearful for their political futures in Somalia, seem loathe to mention this particularly sore point. In a June 14 letter, Sheikh Sharif stated a willingness to "invite an investigative team from the United Nations to make sure that international terrorists do not use the region as a transit route or hiding ground," implying that the UN would act as prevention for a problem that does not already exist. His letter, part of a series that are all similar in content, attempts to portray the ICU as a benevolent organization with only good intentions. While we are prepared to find positive elements within the ICU, acknowledgement of the foreign al Qaida presence will serve as a litmus test for our engagement with any of its leaders. END COMMENT.

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